

Please read "Arc introduction"

[Alien arc] [1] [Gallo] [12328]

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Gallo was a squad leader of the Gray mist. The Gray mist was a small clan in the Nebula consisted of mere four hundred members. They had six squad leaders, Gallo being one of them as well as being the newest addition to the rank of squad leaders.

He was a hyper human, class A, which was rare at this time. Most were below class B.

People of the gray mist were generally easy going people which was a rare sight within the Nebula where betrayals and coups were common. They were neither power hungry nor were they hoping to establish a strong connection to bigger clans. But they had to side with someone bigger for survival. Thus, they supported the Claw of the Ra, CoR in short. The Gray mist did small chores for CoR in exchange of protection.

CoR was basically the remnant of 3Ra Syndicate. When the Syndicate was dissolved, CoR was what was left of the old syndicate. Thousands of years later,

CoR still held one third of the known nebula and was one of the three major factions.

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Gallo, as usual, was having his time at his favorite pub in their base. The Gray mist owned only one station which was constructed around a small asteroid for its gravitational pull. It was a small, rundown station, but it was their home. Their only income was mercenary jobs offered by CoR which brought in enough credit for survival.

Gallo was alone by a bar counter, donning a dark red coat over a loose spacesuit. He featured spiked dark hair and bold eyebrows. His physique was above average as expected from a class A hyper human.

With a glass of drink on the table, there was also a device displaying something on its holographic screen. He was apparently reading news about an energy blade going onto an auction.

A bartender, also Gallo's friend, noticed what was being displayed on the device and remarked casually, "You do realize how expensive it might get."

His name was Matt was cleaning cups with a dried towel. It looked fairly dirty, but he didn't seem to care. "I don't know why you are so itching to get one of those. I mean, even if you do get one, what if it breaks? Who's gonna fix the thing?"

"I just want one, okay? Why won't everyone leave me alone and let me do it?"

Gallo muttered and finished his drink in one shot.

"Because you are wasting time and money, bonehead," He rather forcefully took the glass away from Gallo and refilled it.

"Ach," He uttered and said, "I am going to my room. See you suckers!" He waved at the others in the pub and most of them waved back at him.

The leader of the Gray mist was simply called 'The old man'. He was the oldest surviving member of the Gray mist. No one knew how old he was however. All they knew was that he was an ESP which meant he was normally wiser than anyone else on the station.

The next day, he was summoned by the old man. He resided in his personal chamber which was just a big room with lots of incense. Gallo never liked the strong scent and always disliked to enter the chamber.

"Gallo, my child," His voice was husky and low. He called everyone in the Gray mist his child.

"Sir," Gallo respectably bowed and sat on one knee.

"I hear concerns about you."

Gallo knew what the old man was talking about. He was about to spend all his savings to win an auction for an energy blade.

"You have absolutely nothing to worry about, sir."

"Gallo, my child....," He beamed a very serious stare down at Gallo. "When are you going to marry?"

Gallo almost tumbled with his sudden strike, "That was a very good sneak attack, sir."

"I am serious though," He smiled. "Men save money to support his family."

Gallo smiled nervously. "But, sir, that's only in the ancient times."

The old man did not respond with words but with a grin.

He shrugged, thinking '*whatever*'. However, he still showed his respect to the old man by saying, "As you say, sir."

As he left the old man's chamber, he nearly bumped into a woman. At first, he was going to apologize, but realizing who it was, he hesitated but still apologized reluctantly.

Yudai was one of the squad leaders. To be more exact, she was the 3rd leader, She was an average height woman with very long dark straight hair. They didn't get along too well which was the reason Gallo hesitated at first.

Walking past her who pretty much ignored his apology and went on, his communication bracelet vibrated weakly.

"Gallo, here."

"Boss, are we going to the auction or not?" A feminine voice resounded from his bracelet. It was Karesindia. She belonged to Gallo's squad. A very cheerful one, she was.

"I am heading there. But I am not gonna bring the whole squad."

"Why the hell not?"

"Why should I?" Gallo talked back instantly.

"It's CoR we are going!" She raised her voice. "They might want to capture you!"

Gallo let out of a short laugh. "Blah, we are allied."

"So? No one trusts those motherfuckers."

The Gray mist supported CoR officially on surface, but their relationship was shaky at best. There was little trust between the two factions.

"That's an order. I am going to bring just five members. And that excludes you."

"You are so mean!" She shouted through the channel.

Sighing, he cut off the channel. He stopped by his quarter to get his account card and arrived at the docking bay of the station.

The docking bay was more like a giant hall. There were countless fighter class vessels all over the platform. Ships in need of repair or maintenance were being hung on ceiling by mechanical arms.

He headed over to a small group of people. As he expected, Karesindia, too, was there.

"Boss, we are ready to dispatch!" She exclaimed as Gallo approached them.

Pointing at her, he said to Karesindia, "You are off the team."

"I am going!"

"Boss," Gallo's right hand man, Embrek, approached him and whispered. "You know you can't shake her off. Just let her go. She will bitch all day long if you don't."

Sighing, he nodded. "Fine, get in your fighter."

Jumping around with joy, Karesindia ran into her fighter. She was one of the ace pilot in Gallo's team. Embrek was the other ace. Gallo trusted his teammates, but Embrek and Karesindia were the most trusted.

Fighter class vessels were small crafts that could be operated by one man. In the Nebula, there was no need for bigger ships since their hull would degrade rapidly over time in the nebula.

A fighter was small enough to ignore hull degradation for months before needing for maintenance. Also, fighters that were used in the nebula exclusively had no frontal windows. It relied on sensors completely for its visions.

Gallo and his six members rushed into their fighters. Dock crew quickly inspected each fighter. It only took few seconds for each fighter.

The docking bay had no door. It had an open wall which was shielded magnetically to protect people and air from space. Fighters could just pass through this shield.

Getting into his fighter craft and receiving a greenlight from an inspector, Gallo closed its hatch and booted up his system. Inside of a dark cockpit, holographic interface images began to pop up around.

"This is Gallo, initiating Nav link."

"Roger."

Nav link was a fancy word for what was basically an intranet network. It existed to keep each other in check in the Nebula.

"Course set, engaging thrusters," Gallo spoke.

Only Gallo needed to set a course and other fighters would follow his action automatically since they were linked at the moment.

"Who's going to stand guard?" Gallo asked.

"I will, boss," Embrek replied firmly.

"Fine, rest of you, take a nap or something."

"Roger, boss."

Their fighters had a small personal room behind their cockpit. It was due to a fact it sometimes took hundreds of days to reach a destination. Having nothing to do for such a period might drive someone insane.

Therefore, it was important that they had something to occupy their minds. Some would upload their favorite video to their computer. Some would collect actual books. As long as they could have something to occupy their minds during their journey, it'd work.

In Gallo's case, he enjoyed many e-books regarding the past. The progressive fall of United Sol, the wars between United Sol and Venus, the wars between United Sol and Andromeda union, and et cetera.

At one point, Embrek altered others that they had just been scanned by a probe network.

"We entered CoR," He added shortly after.

Yawning, Gallo counted time. "It took four hours. Well, not too bad."

"A squadron is approaching, fast," Embrek reported.

"The Gray Mist, what is your business?" They demanded an explanation.

"It's personal." Gallo's answer was simple and short.

"We need more information than that. Otherwise, we will open fire."

"If you can't trust your ally, why have them at all?"

"Boss! What are you provoking them for?!" Embrek silently yelled through the nav link.

"Are you high or something?" They seemed to be amused but, since their scan showed nothing, they really didn't have a reason to escalate the situation. "Fine, go through. I will need your name at least."

"Gallo." he killed the channel immediately after.

"Boss, you scared hell out of me." That was Embrek speaking.

"That was cool!" And that was Karesindia excited exclaimment.

"You could have gotten us killed," Zafir pressed his opinion aggressively.

Gallo shrugged. "I don't like them. I mean we are allied. Then they should treat us like an ally. Yet, they treat us like we are lower than them," He then sneered.

"But we are not as powerful as they are," Embrek said. "If they want us dead, we will be dead."

"Which they would never do," Gallo added.

"You never know," Zafir replied to Gallo.

Zafir was a scout. Being a scout meant he'd be on front in field battles and deliver enemy's information to his squad. In space, being a scout meant circling around his squad's formation, gathering miscellaneous information. Zafir and Gallo did not always see eye to eye.

While they were arguing this and that, they arrived at the orbit ring of CoR's planet. The name of their planet was C.O.R. It was obviously named after their faction name.

As soon as they left their fighters and docking bay, they were unwillingly faced with an uncomfortable situation.

Gallo and his men looked as if a gang group compared to general outfit of people in COR's orbit ring.

Gallo donned a dark coat over his suit but the coat was heavily worn off.

Karesindia was wearing tight leather pants, which were brown, and dark brown crop top shirt with a jacket. Embrek was basically half naked. He wore nothing on top, but two thick metal chains across his chest and energy cells were tied to them. Zafir looked the least awkward, but still awkward enough to draw unwanted attention from people around them.

"We don't belong here...," Embrek mumbled to himself as he uncomfortably looked around. People around them wore fashionable clean suits.

"What are you looking at!" Karesindia yelled at a man who was staring at them.

Soon enough, a group of CoR guards approached them.

"Identify yourselves," One of them spoke to Gallo.

Gallo and the others showed their ID. Since they were allies, they had right to enter their territory.

The guard who was checking through their ID scoffed at them briefly. "Enjoy your stay, but you better get changed to something more...," He cleared his throat.

"Something more civilized."

Laughing weakly at them, he turned around and lead his patrol team away.

Embrek took out his hip flask and drank liquor from it and Karesindia split on the platform.

"Let's go to the auction," said Gallo while he was giving a weak slap to Embrek's back.

The original nature of an orbit ring was to provide additional place for people. And it often replaced the need for dorms on barren planets and provided living space for gas planet.

However, it somehow also became a barrier to keep unwanted people out of a planet. Gallo and the others may have been able to enter CoR's orbit ring, but they would have not been able to land on their planet.

Gallo knew this. No, everyone in the Gray mist knew this.

While they were heading to the auction, they felt as if they were walking in a thorn field. And, when they finally reached, they simply had to panic. The place looked like a five-star hotel. They really did not belong there. The eyes were on them clearly.

"Boss..., please don't tell me that we are going in there..., " Embrek's hand was already on his hip flask which was almost empty already at this point.

Pouting, Karesindia muttered, "Oh, man..."

Zafir was silent.

"We have to," Gallo rubbed his hand, preparing to step inside. "Shall we?"

Embrek, Karesindia, Zafir, and others looked obviously screwed.

Upon entering the hotel, the guards immediately stopped Gallo and the others.

"This place is not for the likes of you," A man in black quietly warned Gallo.

"I believe an auction will be starting in a half hour. I need to attend."

The man in black looked troubled. "Fine, but not all of you can't enter," He said, sighing.

"How many can enter then?"

"Maybe, two or three. That's all I can do for you."

Gallo turned around, facing his men. "Embrek, you come with me. Rest of you..."

Karesindia was growling at Gallo.

"Fine, fine, you come, too," Gallo sighed. "Zafir, you lead the rest of men and wait for us at the docking bay."

"Yes, boss," Zafir nodded weakly.

As expected from a five-star hotel, everything in the hotel was exquisite. Gallo's boots were making black footstep marks as he walked on a red carpet.

The auction was held in a special lobby. Men in black stood guard in each corner. Simple seats were properly positioned. Most of seats were already occupied. Gallo and the others had to sit in the last row.

A man in white walked onto a stage in front. He cleared his throat and spot lights focused on him.

"Greetings ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the auction," He made a clicking sound with his fingers. And men in black carried a variety of items that were sealed in a glass case. Among them, there was the energy blade Gallo had been dreaming of.

Embrek pointed at the blade. "That's the thing you want, right, boss?"

Gallo nodded.

"It looks like a chocolate stick, boss, it must be quite smelly, too, seeing how they put it in a sealed case," Embrek remarked and Karesindia chuckled.

The energy blade did look charred. Whether it was actually functional was questionable at this point.

The auction began. As the first item went on the sale, people rose their hands to make a bid. Meanwhile, Gallo wasn't interested in other items. His sole objective was to get the energy blade which was 6th item in the auction. It took roughly forty five minutes before the blade was put on the auction table.

The auctioneer cleared his throat before he began, "This is an antique energy blade. We do not know its origin. We do, however, know that it is functional. Unfortunately, for this specific item, we cannot offer any kind of warranty but an exchange for credit. And that must be done within fifteen days. After that period, we won't take it back nor refund you."

The auctioneer paused for few seconds. "Now, the auction for this item begins," he declared.

Unlike previous items, not many seemed to desire the blade. None rose their hands. When Gallo was about to raise his hand in anticipation of winning it as the sole bidder, a man rose his panel and said, "One million credit."

Gallo startled. He only had three million total in his account and that took him more than sixty years.

"We have one million. Anyone else?" The auctioneer asked around.

He considered making a bid of one point one but decided to go bolder as to scare the other bidder. He hesitantly rose his hand and declared, "One million and half."

"We have one million and half," The auctioneer announced.

The man rose his hand again and declared, "Two million."

Gallo became a little pale. He rose his hand and declared, "Two million and half..."

"We have two million and half," The auctioneer confirmed.

Embrek and Karesindia had worked with Gallo long enough to know that he may not have much left in the bank to continue on. They looked and nodded at each other. And like a pair of gremlins, they giggled.

They dove down from their seats without alerting guards.. Gallo didn't notice since he was in a status of panic. They crawled to the man who was bidding against their boss. Karesindia crawled into his legs and quietly placed her pistol right on his groin. Embrek, on the other hand, crawled behind him and placed his chain around his neck. Only few around the bidder noticed what was going on, but they didn't care to call for guards in fear of retaliation.

Karesindia pushed her pistol and whispered, "If you bid now, I will make sure you won't have your balls anymore."

As if making sure, Embrek tightened his chains on his neck, smiling innocently.

"Any more bids," The auctioneer repeated. "Anymore bids?"

One guard in a corner felt something was a miss and he began to walk toward the man who was making the bids.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

Embrek and Karesindia were already back to Gallo.

Nervously grinning, he shook his head, "No, I am fine..." He decided that it wasn't worth the risk.

The guard gave a nod at the auctioneer.

"The auction for this item has been ended. Congratulations to the winner."

Gallo stuck his back deeply into his chair, sighing deeply.

"Congratulations, boss."

"Haha...", Gallo looked truly relieved. "I thought I was going to lose it."

He received the rusty blade for two and half million credit. As he held it firmly, an expression of satisfaction emerged on his face. This was the first time in his life that he acquired an asset of his own.

They immediately left CoR's orbit ring. They didn't want to stay there any longer. Like Embrek said a few times already, they really did not belong there.

As soon as Gallo's squadron landed on the docking bay of the Gray mist station, an inside channel was opened.

"The old man is looking for you," the voice said.

"Roger," Gallo replied.

He took off from his fighter and stretched out. His bones cracked as he did.

"Alright, guys, you are dismissed!"

"See you later, boss," Embrek responded as he walked away from his fighter.

"Hello, Gallo." A tall and muscular man tapped Gallo's shoulder from behind.

"Hello, Darkan," Gallo looked up to see his face.

Darkan was the first leader of the Gray Mist. He had also the most influence over the clan matters. Of course, the old man was above all the leaders.

"Go see the old man. He's expecting you with a mission."

"I see. Had idea what it is about?"

"Nope. You know how he does thing."

Personally, Gallo wanted to play with the blade. Regardless, he headed right over to the old man's chamber.

"Gallo, my child," The old man spread his arms as if he was going to bug him.

Taking one step back, Gallo hurried to speak to stop the old man, "You don't need to bug me, sir. I was told that you have a mission for me?"

The old man looked slightly disappointed for a moment but he grinned right after.

"Indeed, but first thing first. Let me see your treasure."

Gallo figured he meant the blade. Thus, he took out the rusty and charred blade to give it to him and told him the whole story. The old man carefully held it with his both hands and inspected it.

"Two million and half and this..., I certainly think you wasted your money."

"You are missing my point, sir. CoR treated us like some kind of low being," Gallo muttered. However, his voice was content as if he knew there was nothing that could be done to improve the situation.

A grin from the old man's face vanished. Narrowing his eyes, he looked into Gallo's eyes. "That is how it is simply, my child. The strong looks down upon the weak," His voice was low but very powerful.

Gallo knew that much.

After a moment of silence, he continued, "I have a mission for you. CoR has asked us to investigate the bliss. They believe that the Nomads are setting up an outpost over there."

"The bliss, you say?" Gallo grunted in protest. "They keep giving us dangerous missions, don't they."

"We are mercenaries after all," The old man reminded Gallo.

Bliss..., yes, that was what it was called. There was an area in the known Nebula called Bliss. In the old days where spacecrafts had windows in the Nebula, people were fascinated by such vivid and rich colors that the area had to offer.

Furthermore, thundering in the area sounded as if some kind of orchestra. Some people became addicted and chose not to leave the area until eventually they were dead. People of the Nebula feared the area as well as loved it.

"I strongly suggest you bring your full squadron for this mission. It might get really rough. Your primary task will be destroying the outpost into smithereens. But, if that cannot be done, scan the area at least and get a precise location of the outpost and other man-made objects." The old man stuck out his hand and gave back the blade to Gallo. "Good luck, my child."

Gallo immediately assembled his full force. He had a squadron of thirty eight people, which was the smallest of all in the Gray mist.

Once they gathered at the docking bay. He briefed them the mission. It was a dangerous mission but no one seemed to mind. Death was a common event in lives of mercenaries. Perhaps because of that, everyone in the Gray mist was single. There hadn't been a birth past hundreds years. One of the youngest members was Gallo himself, being sixty two years old.

"Setting a course to the bliss," Gallo said, "Set up nav links."

It'd take at least four days just to reach the area at full speed. Thus, they had a long nap to take.

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"We are approaching the bliss. Only use passive sensor," Gallo began to warm up the others.

"Divide the squadron into groups of six. I will take wing A. Embrek will form wing B. Karesindia will form wing C....."

"Boss, I've entered the bliss," Zafir reported. "Passive sensor shows not a soul. We must sail deeper."

"Alright," Gallo replied. "If you have to use active sensor, make sure you plug something in your ears. Otherwise, you might end up joining the ghosts."

Gallo and his wings wandered the bliss for a while. They located nothing. When they were about to get bored, Zafir picked up something.

"Its signature is too weak. I am going to have to turn on active sensor," Zafir said.

"Be careful. If I find you acting weird, I will forcefully cut off the power to your ship," Gallo warned.

"Roger."

A short moment later, Zafir exclaimed urgently, "Crap! There are whole bunch of them out here! Spread out! Here they come!"

"Turn on active sensor! Spread out! Evasive maneuvers!" Gallo turned his fighter violently. "If you get lost, do not try to be a hero. Just go back to our base!"

"I am detecting at least twelve wings consisted of four each. They came from out of nowhere. They must have a base nearby," Zafir reported.

"Watch my six!" Someone from Gallo's wing yelled. "I am hit! Left thruster gone!"

"Leave the wing. Flee!" Gallo responded at once.

"Yes, boss!"

The dogfight lasted for a while. Gallo's wing was down to three fighters. However, no one died so far. Gallo dismissed damaged fighters from the battle as needed.

"Boss! They are too hard on us. I cannot approach the unknown object and drop bombs at it," Embrek reported with labored breath.

"I will cover you," Karesindia responded.

"I will try to divert them," Gallo also responded.

Breaking their conversation, Zafir shouted, "Boss, I am detecting new wings! Must be reinforcements."

"Embrek, proceed with the plan. Wing D and wing F, follow my lead, dive in!"

Gallo followed sensor readings and headed directly toward the said reinforcements.

"I am hit! Arrrgh!" Gallo's wingman screamed and, soon after, a shockwave hit Gallo's fighter. Gallo bit his lips. But there was no time for despair.

"Head on! Get them!" Gallo shouted.

"Boss! Watch out! I am detecting more wings heading to your location!" Zafir's voice was in distress. "Get out of there, boss! I am getting outta here!"

"Nevermind my situation. Get the job done!"

"Understood!" Embrek and Karesindia replied firmly.

Gallo was reading messy sensor reading. It meant only one thing. There were too many out there.

"Wing F reporting! We can't take much!" Right after the report, wing D also reported in. "We are getting surrounded, boss!"

Hyper human's spiritual infrastructure was not as strong as ESP's. Still, theirs was superior than average human beings. Gallo was able to stay calm and focused on sensor readings and managed to take down few fighters and make a hole to make an escape. There was a reason Gallo was made a squad leader after all; he had the quality.

"Follow me!" Gallo ordered his last two wingmen in his own wing.

By the time, he managed to stay clear, his nav links with Embrek and Karesindia were broken. They were too far apart each other.

"Can anyone detect them?" He asked his wing.

"Negative, sir."

The situation looked grim. Alas, Gallo had not much choices left.

"They are on our tail. We can't shake them off," Wing F reported urgently. "We need to spread out."

That meant retreat.

"Alright, let's hope that Embrek and Karesindia at least got the coordinates of their outpost. Spread out! Head back to the base!"

When his wings were spread out and Gallo himself was also escaping, fortunately his nav link with Embrek came back.

"Boss?!" He sounded unexpected. "Is that you?"

"Embrek?" Gallo recognized his voice.

"It is you! I thought something went terribly wrong!"

"No time!" Gallo said. "Status report, did you complete the mission?"

"Boss, it was a decoy. It was a holographical image with a probe in it. I dropped two set of bombs. Nothing happened. We were retreating to the base," he explained.

Gallo frowned. "So, you are saying we've accomplished nothing?"

There was silence.

"I am going back," Gallo said.

"Are you nuts? Our wings are all broken up. It'd be committing suicide to go back in there!"

"Do you have nav link with Karesindia and the others?"

Embrek hesitated to answer but his sighing could be heard over the channel. "Yes, Karesindia and my wings are still intact," He reported, "But it was really bad out there. We should retreat. No need to risk our lives for those CoR bastards."

"I don't care whether we will be detected or not, full power to active sensors and scan the area. This is an order," Gallo told with a very firm voice. He wasn't going to change his decision.

"Fine, boss. I will call Karesindia and the others back."

Gallo's fighter made a violent and unstable one-hundred-eighty degree turn and flew straight back to the Nomads forces. They weren't expecting anyone to return, and as a result their wings were confused momentarily.

Taking his chances, Gallo took down about ten of their fighters in row.

"Yahoo! Way to go, boss!" Karesindia was shouting all over the channel.

"Have you gotten anything yet?" Gallo inquired.

Zafir responded, "Yes, after a full scan, it was really a decoy. I am detecting something else also. I think it's an asteroid. Unusually large, I'd say. There is some heavy concentration of iron-related materials there. It could be just some iron deposit. Or it could be what we are looking for."

"Good enough," Gallo said, "Okay, guys. Let's make this quick. Hover over the rock and drop bombs. Let's see what kind of explosion it makes."

"Roger, boss," His entire squadron replied.

There was still strong resistance, but Gallo and the others have managed to take their chances and destroyed more than half of them. Especially, Gallo alone had taken down more than thirty fighters so far.

"Bombs away," Embrek reported gleefully. "Energy field detected. This is it, boss. This is the base."

Gallo grinned. "That's it. Let's drop everything we have and shoot it up a bit."

However, its shields were strong. Even after dropping every bombs they had, its shield was still intact. It was partially because only half of Gallo's entire squadron was present also.

"What should we do, boss? I am detecting more reinforcements," Embrek reported.

"We've done our job. Well, our secondary objective at least," Gallo responded positively. "We will still get paid anyway. Head back to home!"

"Roger!"

The Nomads fighters did not chase at all when Gallo's squadron began to retreat.

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"Four fighters are missing," The dock master of the Gray mist station looked over Gallo and his fighters on platform.

Missing meant 'dead'.

"I see...," Gallo narrowed his eyes. "So, they couldn't make it."

"Well, most of your fighters look pretty beaten up. It must have been pretty bad,"

The dock master obviously was trying to comfort Gallo.

"It wasn't your fault," Embrek was also trying.

"We all die like this anyway," Karesindia was also at it although her method wasn't the best.

"I am going to report back to the old man and do the ritual." Having said so, he left the docking bay at once.

The Gray Mist had a custom for the dead. Since he was the leader of a squadron, when one of his members died, he'd pack the dead member's belongings into a bag and would throw them into a cremating facility in the station and watch them to reduce into ashes. If it was a leader who died, then the old man would do the ritual.

He informed the old man of what happened meanwhile.

"Gallo, my child, you've done what you could. Nobody will blame you," The old man spoke stoically although there was a strange hint of comforting in his stoic tone.

Nevertheless, it was true. No one would blame Gallo for the four dead members. All the members of the Gray mist knew the risk. Besides, that was the life of mercenaries.

The old man continued, "You've completed your mission. I shall report the results to CoR."

Gallo was frozen on one knee and had his head dropped. He was silent. The old man narrowed his eyes. He approached Gallo and tapped his back.

"Gallo, my child," He softly and quietly talked to him. "Let's at least hope that they died in instant."

Gallo entered one of the 'missing' members' rooms. There weren't much stuff around. Few casual clothes in his cabinet and a set of cards..., when he was packing his stuff off his desk, he noticed a disk, labeled '*Bliss*'. He narrowed his eyes and glared at it. Then he wondered what was in it.

He returned to his quarter and dropped four large bags with full of belongings of the four missing members by door, leaving it open. He inserted the disk into a player on his desk.

Holographic images emerged above the desk. It was displaying scenes that he had never seen before. He simply did not know what they were. The disk appeared to have some kind of images and the player was playing a slide show.

"Those are called sea, tree, sunset and grass."

Gallo startled as he heard a voice. Looking back, he saw Yudai.

"What did you say?"

"Those are sea, tree, sunset and grass. I think those images are from Earth." With folded arms, she leaned against door frame.

"So, those are....," Gallo gazed at the images vacantly. "I've never seen those for real."

"I've. Though I lived on New Earth. They duplicated Earth environment there although they failed to duplicate the blue sky of Earth. I've seen and felt trees, grasses, soils, and wind."

Gallo was silently staring at the slide show of images.

"I guess I am beginning to understand how you guys feel," She let out of a weak laugh. "When I had them for granted, I really didn't feel anything. Now that I've been apart from them for so long, I guess...."

Gallo cut her words. "You are pretty talkative today."

She blushed momentarily. "Is there something wrong with that?" She pouted. Her tone calmed down right after. "It wasn't your fault, you know," She said firmly.

Gallo did not answer to her. Instead, he turned the player off, took out the disk and placed it in one of the bags by door.

"Excuse me, now," Picking up the bags, he left her behind.

When Gallo arrived at cremating facility, the one in charge of the facility silently left the room, leaving Gallo alone. The machine was active, but nothing was burning inside as if it was prepared for him.

He threw the bags one after one into the machine reluctantly and watched them turning into ashes. Watching flames dance through a reinforced window on front of the machine made him think again.

Was it really not my fault?

This wasn't his first time he had his members gone 'missing'. And every time it happened, he had questioned himself the same question over and over. He could

have called the operation off before it came too rough. He could have been more careful. He knew that he took great risks during the mission.

Then why couldn't he, he'd wonder. The answer was simple and he had known it all along.

He saw the blue sky for the first time in his life through digital images. He also saw waving grasses, leaves, and trees. Sea and lakes were also new to him. Soils meant metal platform for Gallo; Sky meant metal ceiling to him. There had never been sea or lakes for him. Heck, he had never seen a pond even. The biggest collection of water he had ever seen was a bath tub.

He stood still until flame completely died. He also waited for the machine to cool down and gathered ashes and placed them in a leather pouch. He hung the pouch on his belt, next to the blade and left the room.

It's easy to blame myself. But it is much harder to admit so.